

DATABASE SYSTEM AND METHOD WITH IMPROVED LOCKS

DESCRIPTION

5 Technical Field

This invention relates generally to database management systems, and more particularly to the handling of locks for database records.

Background Art

10 Computerized databases are used to store large amounts of information. This information is often organized in a hierarchical fashion, e.g. into fields, records, sets, etc. Such a hierarchical organization tends to be virtual, rather than physical, based upon the algorithms implemented by the database management systems.

15 Databases can be of various types, including flat databases and relational databases. Generally speaking, relational databases are preferred when dealing with large numbers of records which need to be accessed in a variety of ways. For example, many business organizations use a relational database to handle their human resource ("HR") function.

20 Databases are usually administered by one or more database administrators. In small organizations, such in a small business, there may be only one administrator for the database. This has the advantage of simplicity, in that it reduces potential conflicts. However, in large companies it is impractical to have a single administrator to handle an entire database function, e.g. the HR database function and, therefore, conflicts between multiple administrators occur and must be handled.

25 One way to handle the potential conflict of having multiple administrators trying to access and perhaps change the same data can be handled with the provision of database locks. That is, if a first administrator (referred to herein as a "prior administrator") accesses a particular set of records, a "lock" on those records can be

implemented such that a second administrator (referred to herein as a "new administrator") is prevented from at least changing that those records. In many instances, the new administrator may be prevented from even viewing the locked files.

5 This method of locking portions of a database has the advantage of preventing the inherent conflicts and potential instability of the database when two or more administrators access the same data at the same time. For example, if both administrators were attempting to update the same field within a record, the system could be destabilized and data could be lost or corrupted.

10 A problem that happens from time to time in large organizations is that a prior administrator unnecessarily locks out a new administrator. For example, with systems in the prior art, when a prior administrator first accesses or "queries" the records, a lock is immediately put in place. However, it could be that the prior administrator does not even have privileges sufficient to allow access to those records. In consequence, neither the prior administrator nor the new administrator can access that
15 information. In fact, until the prior administrator has released the lock, no new administrator can be provided with access to those files. This can be very troublesome in large organizations where there may be hundreds of administrators located in multiple countries around the world. That is, it maybe hard to identify the administrator who is locking up the records and, in fact, the records may become
20 inaccessible for an extended period of time.

This problem has no easy solution, and has been long-felt in the industry. The logical solution would be not provide a lock to any potential administrator if they do not have the authority to view or manipulate those records. However, to fully check all of the privileges for all applicable records might require thousands of database
25 queries. Even with modern, high speed computers such searches would be too time consuming to be practical.

Disclosure of the Invention

An aspect of the present invention includes a quick, preliminary screening method to prevent an administrator from creating a lock without proper authority. While this preliminary screening will not be entirely conclusive, it can eliminate a
5 very high percentage of instances where it is clear that an administrator has no chance of being authorized to access that set of records. In fact, in tests on a sample system, the preliminary screening can identify about 95% of the instances when an administrator has no chance of being authorized to access a set of records. The small
10 percentage of time (5% in this example) when the administrator is not screened out by the preliminary screening and it turns out that the administrator was, indeed, not authorized, the system is no worse off than it had been prior to implementing the pre-screening methodologies of embodiments of the present invention.

Briefly, a method for handling database locks in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention includes detecting a new query from a new
15 administrator for a set of database records capable with being associated with a new lock. When the new query is detected, it is determined with a preliminary screening whether the new administrator has any chance of being authorized to acquire the new lock. If it is determined that the new administrator does have a chance of acquiring a lock, the system attempts to acquire the new lock. If, however, the new administrator
20 fails to acquire the new lock, the new administrator is informed to that fact. Optionally, the new administrator can be provided with information identifying the prior administrator that holds a prior lock. Also optionally, the new administrator can be provided with contact information for the prior administrator, such that the prior administrator can be contacted to determine if the prior lock is still required.

25 In another aspect of the present invention, a computer readable media including program code segments for handling database locks includes a code segment for detecting a new query from a new administrator, a code segment determining whether the new administrator has any chance of being authorized to acquire the lock, a code segment attempting to acquire the new lock if the new administrator has a chance of

being authorized, and a code segment informing the new administrator of a failure to acquire the new lock. Optionally, the code segment informing the new administrator can identify the prior administrator. Further optionally, the code segments for informing the new administrator can include contact information for the prior administrator.

10 In another aspect of the present invention, a method for making a preliminary determination as to whether a database administrator has authorization to access a set of database records includes determining whether a database administrator has no chance of being so-authorized. In particular, a method in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention determines that a database administrator has no chance of being authorized to access a designated set of database records if the database administrator does not have one or more of (a) write authorization; (b) a lack of conflict of interest; (c) organizational permission; or (d) current authorization. The method of the disclosed embodiment also includes determining that a database administrator has a chance of being authorized if the database administrator has one or more of: (a) write authorization and maximum administrator authorization; and (b) write authorization, no conflict of interest, organizational permission, and current authorization.

20 Another aspect of the present invention includes a computer readable media including program code segments for implementing the aforementioned method for making a preliminary determination as to whether a database administrator has authorization to access a set of database records.

25 Yet another aspect of the present invention includes a database system including locks including means for detecting a new query from a new administrator for a set of database records presently associated with the new lock, means for determining whether the new administrator has any chance of being authorized to acquire the lock, means for attempting to acquire the new lock if the new administrator has a chance of being authorized, and means for informing the new administrator of a failure to acquire the new lock if a prior lock has already been

acquired due to a prior query by a prior administrator. Optionally, the database system can further include means for identifying prior administrators, and means for providing contact information for the prior administrator.

Another embodiment of a database system in accordance with the present invention includes a number of administrative terminals, and a database server capable of being accessed by those administrative terminals. The database server includes at least in part, a database program capable of managing a number of records. The database program preferably includes the functionality of: (a) detecting a new query from a new administrator at a new administrator terminal for a set of database records that is associated with the new lock; (b) determining whether the new administrator has any chance of being authorized to acquire the new lock; (c) attempting to acquire the new lock if the new administrator has a chance of being authorized; and (d) informing the new administrator at the new administrator terminal of a failure to acquire the new lock if a prior lock has already been acquired due to a prior query by a prior administrator on a prior administrator station. Optionally, informing the new administrator includes identifying, on a new administrator station, the prior administrator. Also optionally, informing the new administrator includes, on the new administrator station, providing contact information for the prior administrator.

An advantage of the various embodiments and aspects of the present invention is that there is a quick, efficient, preliminary screening of administrators to prevent them from acquiring locks when there is no chance that they will be authorized for those files. By providing a quick, preliminary screening, the majority of instances when an administrator does not have authority to access the files will be detected. In those instances, where the preliminary screening still allows an unauthorized administrator to obtain a lock, the system is no worse off than it had been previously.

Another advantage of embodiments of the present invention is that the administrator who has locked a set of files will be identified to a new administrator attempting to access those files. This identification can include an identification of the administrator holding the lock and, in some cases, contact information. Therefore, a

qualified, pre-screened and authorized new administrator can contact the prior administrator to request that the lock be removed.

These and another advantages of the present invention will no doubt will become apparent to those of skill in the art upon reading of the following descriptions
5 and a study of the several figures of the drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawings

FIGURE 1 is a block diagram of a database management system with locks in accordance with embodiments of the present invention;

FIGURE 2a is a screen shot of a sample set of records accessible in the
10 database system of Fig. 1 as seen by a prior administrator;

FIGURE 2b is a screen shot of an attempt of a new administrator to access the same set of files as the prior administrator of Fig. 2a.

FIGURE 3 is a diagram of an exemplary Human Resource (HR) database model;

15 FIGURE 4 is a flow diagram of an embodiment of a method for handling database locks in accordance with the present invention;

FIGURE 5 is a flow diagram of the operation "IS THERE A CHANCE THAT THERE IS AUTHORIZATION?" of Fig. 4; and

20 FIGURE 6 is a flow diagram of the "INFORM USER OF LOCK" operation of Fig. 4.

Mode(s) for Carrying Out the Invention

In Fig. 1, a database system 10 including locks includes a number of administrator terminals 12 coupled to a database server 14 which administers a
25 database 16. Typically the database is stored in a computer readable medium such as,

for example, a hard disk drive, semiconductor memory, a tape drive, or an optical disk drive.

It should be noted that the database system 10 is illustrated in a functional, rather than physical, form in that the functionality of administrative terminals 12, database server 14, and database 16 can be implemented on one or more physical devices. Typically, however, each of the administrative terminals 12 comprises a personal computer or computer work station available for use by a human administrator. Likewise, the database server 14 can be implemented in one or more physical servers or computer systems, typically dependent upon the scale of the database system. For example, if the database system 10 is designed to support the HR function of a large, international company, the database server 14 may comprise dozens or even hundreds of separate servers located around the world. Likewise, the database 16 can be localized or distributed.

The terminals 12, database 14, and computer readable media 16 can be directly coupled together, or can be linked together for communications via, for example, a network, as be well appreciated by those skilled in the art. Often, the network is a TCP/IP network in the form of one or more of, for example, a local area network, an Intranet or the Internet. In the case of publicly accessible networks such as the Internet, security protocols (e.g. encryption) are typically used to prevent the unauthorized access to confidential information.

Administrators attempt to access files through database "queries", as is well known to those skilled in the art of database management. As noted previously, a problem can occur when a first administrator ("prior administrator") on a first administrator terminal 12 causes a "lock" on a file or set of files. This means a second administrator ("new administrator") and subsequent administrators cannot fully access that set of files 18, or may not be able to access the files at all until the lock is removed.

As used herein, "set of files" shall mean data including at least one file having at least one record. Therefore, a "set of files" can include a single file or even a single

record, although typically it includes a number of files, each of which includes a number of records.

In Fig. 2a, a screen shot 20 illustrate a HR master data page for a hypothetical employee by the name of Miss Pia Vier. Miss Vier is assigned personnel number
5 "31415" and has personnel records falling under a variety of "Infotypes" including personal data, addresses, bank details, etc. as shown on the left hand side of her basic personal data folder. Other folders such as "contract data," "gross/net payroll," "net payroll," etc. are shown hidden behind the basic personal data in this view. On the
10 right hand side of the screen shot 20, a number of search parameter fields are provided such that the administrator can search through the various records for this employee.

In Fig. 2b, a screen shot 22 illustrates the screen that is seen on a new administrator's terminal for a new query. In this instance, it can be seen that most of the identification information concerning employee 31415 is not available. This is a first indication that a prior administrator has a lock on this employee's files.
15 Furthermore, in the screen shot 22 an indication of the identity 24 of the prior administrator indicates that "KLEINU" is the holder of the lock. Contact information 26 (in this case KLEINU's telephone extension "x1234") can be provided such that KLEINU can be contacted to determine whether the lock can be removed from these records.

20 In Fig. 3, a diagram of a particular example of a database structure consistent with the aforementioned HR database is shown. It should be noted this database structure is presented by way of example only, and not limitation. That is, there are many ways to create records, files, and sets of files with respect to database management systems, as would be appreciated by those skilled in the art. In this
25 diagram, a person (employee) is designated as CP, while various work assignments or "contracts" for the person are designated as P, where the set of P files is designated as {P1, P2, ... , PN}. This is in recognition of the fact that in large companies, an employee CP may have several distinct job functions P, each with their own parameters.

For example, in a multinational company, an employee may have a job as a software developer in his home country, and a software salesman in another country. As another example, an employee may have a half-time job as an administrative assistant during the morning hours, and a half-time job as a graphical designer in the afternoon hours. Therefore, in recognition of the fact that an employee can have multiple work assignments or "contracts" with the company or organization, a hierarchical file structure is set up with the CP files at a root level and a P files branching from the root level. Each of the P files will include various "Infotype" records including, for example, address, pay, challenges, garnishments, etc.

It should be noted that a number of the Infotypes for a P file will be the same regardless of the contract. For example, the address, challenges, garnishments, Infotypes will be the same for each of the P files under a particular CP file because they refer to the same person. However, other Infotypes such as the organizational assignment, pay, etc. maybe different from P file to P file. Therefore, access authority (i.e. privileges) for each CP and P file, and each Infotype, may vary from administrator to administrator.

In the past, the problem sometimes occurred that an administrator attempting to access, for example, Infotype garnishments of a file P1 creates locks on all of the P files and the CP file as well. This is because the system has to assume that the administrator accessing contract P1 could change common Infotypes such as address, challenges, etc. and, therefore, the entire CP file should be locked. However, this created inefficiencies in the past since the administrator making the query might not even have the authority view the garnishments records, for example. That authority would be determined by a set of privileges that depends upon the rank, security clearance, seniority, conflicts, etc. of the particular administrator.

In particular, where there are hundreds of administrators, each of which may have many different preferences, it is very difficult to determine conclusively in advance whether an administrator has the authority to access a particular set of

records. An aspect of the present invention addresses a new method for handling database locks which reduces the chance of an inadvertent lock on a set of records.

In Fig. 4, a process 28 illustrates an embodiment of a method for handling database locks in accordance with the present invention. The process 28 begins at 30 and, in an operation 32, is determined if there is a new query. If not, operation 32 continues to loop in a wait loop until a new query is observed. Once a new query has been observed, an operation 34 determines whether there is a chance that there is authorization for the new administrator to access the requested set of files. If not, an operation 36 informs the new administrator and returns process control to operation 32 to await a new query. However, if there is a chance that there is authorization, an operation 38 attempts to acquire a lock on the set files. An operation 40 then determines whether the attempt of operation 38 was successful. If not, an operation 42 informs the new administrator that there is already a lock on the set of files, and an operation control returns to operation 32.

If, on the other hand, the operation 40 determines that the attempted lock acquisition was successful, the new administrator is provided with access to the set of records in an operation 44. Also, since the new administrator has successfully acquired the lock, he or she becomes the prior administrator and the lock becomes a prior lock to any subsequent administrator. The administrator continues to process the records in an operation 44 until the administrator "checks-out." from the record, i.e. finishes with the record and releases the lock. An operation 48 then unlocks the records and operational control returns to operation 32 to await a new query.

In Fig. 5, the process 34 ("IS THERE A CHANCE THAT THERE IS AUTHORIZATION?") is illustrated in greater detail. Process 34 begins at 50 and, in an operation 52 it is determined whether the administrator has write authorization. If not, it is determined that administrator has no chance of obtaining a lock on the system in an operation 54 and the process 34 is complete at 56. If the administrator does have write authorization as determined by operation 52, an operation 58 determines whether the administrator has the maximum authorization available for the system.

This can, for example, be provided to a master system administrator. If so, it is determined that there is at least chance that this administrator has access in an operation 60 and the process is complete at 62.

Alternatively, if operation 58 determines that the administrator does not have
5 the maximum authorization level, an operation 64 determines whether the employee number matches the administrator. Typically, an administrator is not permitted to change certain of his or her own employment records due to potential conflict of interest. If the employee number does match the administrator, it is then determined an operation 66 if the access is minimal, e.g. to non-critical information such as the
10 administrators' home address. If not, e.g. the administrator is attempting to accessing his or her own pay records, a conflict of interest is detected and process control is returned to operation 54.

If, however, the operation 66 determines that the access to the set of records is minimal in nature, an operation 68 determines whether the administrator is authorized
15 to have access to sets of files relating to personnel in that particular part of the organization. If not, operational control is turned over to operation 54 indicating there is no chance of authorization. However, if the administrator is currently authorized, as determined in an operation 70, operational control is turned over to operation 60 indicating that there is a chance of authorization and, if not, process control is turned
20 over to operation 54 to indicate that there is no chance. In either case, the process 34 would then be complete.

In Fig. 6, the operation 42 ("INFORM USER OF LOCK") of Fig. 4 is illustrated in greater detail. Process 42 begins at 72 and, in an operation 74, it is determined who is the holder of the lock, i.e. who is the prior administrator. In an
25 operation 76, contact information can be looked up for the prior lock holder. In an operation 78, the requested can be informed in the lock with contact information of the prior lock holder. The process 42 is then complete at 80.

Referring again to Fig. 2b, it can be seem that informing the new administrator that there is a lock can take several levels. On the simplest level, a new administrator

can simply be informed that the records are locked without any indication of who holds that lock. On another level, the holder of the lock can be identified e.g. in this case KLEINU. On a still further level contact information can be provided, such as the extension number x 1234 of the prior administrator KLEINU. Of course, as will
5 be apparent to those skilled in the art, there are other forms of contact information that can be provided to the new administrator, such as the e-mail address, pager number, cell phone number, etc. of the holder of the prior lock.

A primary example in the preceding descriptions has been in the context of a Human Resource database management system. As is no doubt apparent to those of
10 ordinary skill in the art, aspects of the present invention are useful a wide variety of database applications employing locks. It is therefore intended that the preceding examples be considered by way of illustration, and not restriction, and that present invention be interpreted as including all those modifications, permutations, extensions, equivalents, and the like that fall within the true spirit and scope of the present
15 inventions.

What is claimed is: